DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 343 122 CS 213 193

AUTHOR Agatucci, Cora
TITLE Writing Women in(to) the Curriculum.
PUB DATE Nov 91
NOTE 17p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the National Council of Teachers of English (81st, Seattle, WA, November 22-27, 1991).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Autobiographies; *Females; *Feminism; Higher Education; Nontraditional Students; Self Esteem; *Sex Differences; Undergraduate Students; *Writing Instruction
IDENTIFIERS Academic Discourse; Central Oregon Community College; *Feminist Criticism; *Feminist Scholarship; Writing Development

ABSTRACT

How can classrooms and the educational system be made more productive, humane, enabling, and equitable for all students, particularly through writings studied and produced? The values of inclusive feminist pedagogy can lead to answers. Women emerge from high school with higher grade point averages but lower self-esteem than men. Female and male teachers alike are responsible for inequitable and unconscious differences in the way they treat male and female students. Female students, particularly those who may be returning to school after undergoing life changes, are well served by teachers who encourage active learning and share classroom authority with students. Writing instruction, such as an autobiography course offered through Central Oregon Community College's Changing Directions program, has proven especially helpful in promoting confidence and writing skill. Teachers must examine what they view as good writing, because unstated assumptions, conventions, and expectations can empower or disable students and teachers alike. If they wish to move forward, educators must commit themselves to the uncharted ground of feminist pedagogy and the primary research it stimulates. (Nineteen references are attached.) (SG)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

CORA AGATUCCI
DEPT. OF HUMANITIES
CENTRAL OREGON COMMUNITY COLLEGE
2600 N.W. COLLEGE WAY
BEND, OR 97701-5998

WRITING WOMEN IN(TO) THE CURRICULUM

ED343122

CS213173

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY

C. Agatucci

TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)."

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

X This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.

☐ Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.

• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

CORA AGATUCCI
DEPT. OF HUMANITIES
CENTRAL OREGON COMMUNITY COLLEGE
2600 N.W. COLLEGE WAY
BEND, OR 97701-5998

WRITING WOMEN IN(TO) THE CURRICULUM

How can we make our classrooms and our educational system more productive, humane, enabling, and equitable for all our students? In particular, how can my students, colleagues, and I create such environments through the writing we study and the writing we produce? I believe the values of inclusive feminist pedagogy can lead us to answers. One of those values asserts the need to contextualize our instruction, to know who our particular students are so that we may prepare ourselves to meet their needs more effectively. Does gender matter in learning about our students' identities and educational needs? Of course it does, as do many other identity factors--although not always in the ways we may anticipate.

Adrienne Rich, among others, has called for a pedagogy of location, whereby we map our own and our students' identities as a means to reciprocal understanding, communication, and education. The generic concept of student--without regard to gender, age, culture, religion, and all the other ways it is possible for our students to be different--is inadequate, leads us into blunders we never intend and damage we never know. A contextual approach to writing instruction means listening to our students' stories and seeking out as many other resources as possible to learn all we can--however uncomfortable and unconventional it may make us.

Thus, my investigations have taught me much about the students of Central Oregon Community College, more than half of whom are women. I am

052193

convinced many of them benefit from diversified approaches to learning and writing, from respect for their differences and resistance to hierarchical judgment, from cooperative and collaborative pedagogies, from models of "connected" as well as "critical" thinking, from narrative and expressive as well as argumentative and expository writing experience, from affirmation of the importance of process and exploration as well as of product and closure.

Carol Gilligan has taught me that young white middle class, as well as Chicana and working class, women are at risk in my classroom. The emerge from high school with higher GPAs but lower self-esteem and confidence than their male fellow-travelers. The Oregon State Department of Education sponsors GESA teacher training--"GESA" meaning Gender/Ethnic Expectations and Student Achievement--in response to observational studies in our classrooms. These studies show that female and male teachers alike are responsible for inequitable and unconscious differences in the way they treat their male and female students. For example, boys tend to receive more precise feedback and constructive criticism regarding their schoolwork and performance than do girls, and teachers tend to encourage boys to solve problems for themselves while those same teachers foster dependency in girls by doing problems for them.

Self-esteem psychology and a fine program called Changing Directions at COCC have much to tell me about our re-entry women students: often depressed; valuing relationships more than work in their lives; undergoing very difficult transitions usually after a loss--a husband dies, a divorce, children grow up and leave home--trying to adapt to new social roles; these women return to school with special problems and needs. They tend to feel

more guilt for not taking care of their children themselves and for neglecting housework while going to college; they tend to be passive, feel inferior, lack confidence, and be poor planners. These women must be empowered to choose for themselves, to take an active role in their educations, to pay more attention to their own needs.

Both these groups of women students would be well served by teachers who encourage active learning, who share classroom authority with their students, who act as midwife in supporting these women without doing their thinking for them, who construct truth through negotiation and consensus, rather than through conflict and disagreement. In serving the educational needs of our students, writing is an especially potent instrument. Gilligan, Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, Tarule, as well as others have demonstrated the importance of helping our female students find their voices. Rebecca Blevins Faery observes: "language is the currency of the liberating classroom, and students have as much of it to spend as do teachers . . ."; teachers should not "usurp all the available linguistic space;" students should be "invited to use language, especially written language, to explore reactions, feelings, connections between their subject and their experience . . . " (206).

Caywood and Overing have demonstrated that student-centered process pedagogy and feminist theories overlap in their goals and methodologies. Process pedagogy enlarges definitions of writing and its legitimate forms, even as feminist literary critics work to revise canons and hierarchies in order to broaden the curriculum and include alternative forms of discourse, such as private poetry, letters, diaries, journals, oral and written personal narratives, and autobiographies--often the only forms

of discourse assumed to be available to women (xiii, xii). Both groups work to accommodate and nurture difference; both groups seek to invest students with active roles and confidence in their own authority and ability.

As a feminist, a writing teacher, and a women's studies instructor, I feel it is particularly important to make my teaching assumptions explicit if I wish to test their efficacy with my particular student constituencies. One of those assumptions, for example, has been that autobiographical and narrative writing are more conducive and enabling to women's than to men's ways of learning, knowing, and writing. This assumption I will return to examine more closely later in this paper.

One of the courses I teach is a creative writing course in autobiography. Students usually come to this class already convinced of the value of personal writing and seeking an alternative to other writing courses stressing expository and argumentative modes. Few young men choose to take this course. My students and I have had very positive connected learning and writing experiences in Writing 240. The models provided by diverse autobiographers such as Maya Angelou, N. Scott Momaday, Russell Baker, Richard Wright, Lillian Hellman, Ivan Doig, and Maxine Hong Kingston, offer students new formal and substantive choices in composing self, voice, and life stories in a supportive learning environment. Such choices may be particularly important in empowering nontraditional student who have difficulty mastering expository and argumentative academic prose forms.

I watch confidence and skill grow in the process of composing a self--or several selves--in Writing 240 journals and other autobiographical writings, where students are free to open up generic distinctions and

redefine the form to suit their own autobiographical purposes. Writing 240 students--male and female alike--report that they develop individual enabling writing processes and productive workshop group dialogue as we write our way through the term. And I am freed--temporarily--from the essay writing prescriptions I must enforce in my other academic writing classes.

Another assumption teachers and researchers have made--and some research findings support--is that male students excel in argumentative writing, while female students tend to dislike it and perform it poorly. Carol Gilligan supports this view in her seminal study in *a Different Voice* as do the authors of *Women's Ways of Knowing*. Gilligan concludes that women's mode of thinking is contextual and narrative rather than formal and abstract, while males conceive of morality as fairness, centered in understanding rights and rules. Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, and Tarule distinguish connected knowing and separate knowing as gender-related epistemological orientations, hinging on the difference Peter Elbow has conceptualized as believing vs. doubting. The latter describes the impetus behind argument and critical thinking, while the former is used to explain how most women prefer to affirm their connection to others and to use personal experience as a means to think <u>with</u>, rather than argue <u>against.</u> More recently in "Issues of Gender in Thinking and Learning," Professor Clinchy has reemphasized that both critical and connected thinking, argument and narrative, have value in the academy, but she objects strenuously to an educational system that privileges the former and devalues the latter.

An institutional bias does seem to exist against creative and autobiographical writing as legitimate academic experience in composition and humanities. As Caywood and Overing have observed, the traditional composition classroom privileges expository and argumentative essays, advancing clear theses in impersonal rational voices; over exploratory and autobiographical genres, featuring alternative, organic forms and intimate, subjective voices (xii). The standard justification for this set of values seems to be that the freshman composition sequence functions as "service" courses intended to prepare students for college survival and introduce them to academic writing. Yet this justification seems less and less satisfactory to me. It tends to negate the value of private, personal, or informal writing as literature and as legitimate and important ways of learning in the academy. Moreover, students often have much difficulty translating their writing experience with the expository essay in traditional rhetorical modes to writing tasks assigned in other coursework. Many composition researchers have observed that the academy contains not one but many discourse communities within its bounds (see, for example, McCarthy). Yet, as David Bleich points out, many of us are still teaching "expository prose" in college as "the basic skill that underlies the ideal of academic discourse," despite the findings in composition and literary studies which indicate that "the so-called ability to write is not a single definable thing, that writing in different disciplines requires different kinds of teaching techniques, and that faculty in different disciplines must participate in writing programs . . ." (10). Furthermore, Bleich believes that genre hierarchies favoring "expository prose and academic discourse serve

the traditional sex/gender system and inhibit what most of us accept to be the necessary and urgent task of reforming that system" (14).

I think we need to examine the source of students' resistance to assuming the authorial roles embedded in the types of academic writing we teach. Some students cannot wield the potent oppositional weapon of argument, because they are not ready to assume the role Toril Moi calls "the author as God the Father of the Text" (62). Phyllis Lassner has suggested that "[f]or those who do not recognize themselves as worthy opponents with a fair chance of winning, [even the reportedly 'humane'] Rogerian rhetoric can be . . . as inhibiting and constraining as any other form of argumentation" (223). The "subjective knower," as defined in *Women's Ways of Knowing* (chs. 3, 4), one who has fought hard against crushing odds to learn to trust herself, may be far from prepared to admit the validity of an opposing viewpoint. Deanne Bogdan has argued for the value of agnosis, stemming from a "poetics of need": students may block things they can't yet let themselves know as a constructive gesture, needed to maintain identity at certain stages of their development. On another front, Andrea Lunsford and Lisa Ede call for a "Rhetoric in a New Key" which encourages alternative, collaborative models of authorship. In sum, student reactions to our pedagogies and to the types of classroom roles we assign them are complex and far from adequately represented by a single model of a "generic" student or an authoritarian model of the author. Nor are the writing kinds that may help these students survive in college and find a voice in their other academic classes adequately encompassed by an "ideal of academic discourse" represented by the expository or argumentative essay.

There are some feminist composition teachers like Catherine Lamb who believe argument can be transformed into a usable and useful mode of discourse for all students if it is used as a means, not an end; and if students are asked to work "beyond argument" to agreement and consensus reached by mediation and negotiation. Other feminist educators like Victoria Steinitz and Sandra Kanter have serious misgivings about the value of a "connected education" for working class women--in particular, at the College of Public and Community Services at the University of Massachusetts at Boston. They maintain:

> Encouraging women to find their voices must be followed by challenging women to develop the confidence and courage to use their voices--to speak up at home and work, question authorities, and fight for what they believe is right. While many women may find debate and confrontation uncomfortable, we believe women must learn how to contend in adversarial arenas; otherwise, our needs and interests will continue to be ignored. (139)

But I believe we must be alert to opportunities to change, rather than perpetuate, the negative, debilitating elements of that "competitive, conflict-laden society" (139) where Steinitz and Kanter remind us we live.

I agree that argument should be taught as one of several academic writing modes. It is most useful in helping students discover, define and support their own opinions. I disagree, however, that it is truly the paradigm of all academic writing that we sometimes treat it as in our freshman composition sequences. And I truly doubt whether it is a writing

mode that lends itself to conflict resolution or genuine communication, even among the academics who excel in this mode of discourse.

Mariana Torgovnick of Duke University might concur. She wrote in *Profession '90* these observations about her own academic writing experience: "No one who gets around to writing a book, or even an essay, ever reads everything that has been written about a subject. Yet we cling to the fiction of completeness and coverage that the academic style preserves" (27). Further she observes, "Traditional academic style says, '. . . You don't need to read me except to write your own project; I am the kind of writing that does not want to be heard'" (27). This, then, is a description of writing that has limited uses, that pretends to a fiction of completeness and wears a mask of combative omniscience. This is writing that is not meant to be heard; it is "writing for professional advancement . . . for a fairly narrow circle of critics . . ." (27). It is too often writing that does not matter much--perhaps because we don't care personally much about it. Yet our colleges, our graduate schools, academia promotes this kind of writing.

When Mariana Torgovnick wants to be heard, wants to make a real connection with her readers and truly communicate, she says she undergoes a transformation: she has to think of herself as a writer "with feelings, histories, and desires--as well as information and knowledge" (27). She then engages in what she calls "writerly writing," which need not be full scale autobiographical writing, but must be "personal writing" (27) that she cares about--writing intended to be heard, writing intended to be a genuine and exciting act of communication.

Olivia Frey has also expressed her dissatisfaction with the "adversarial methods" we employ against each other in scholarly discourse. These methods are based on an ethos of self-assertion, competition, and the primacy of achieving individual goals. Frey observes that we often advance our own views at the expense of demeaning others', however worthy. Frey reminds her readers that until recently women have rarely made their way into this scholarly combat zone and have had little role in shaping the conventions of academic discourse. But now we must use opportunities to transform it, rather than blindly adhere to conventions we find distasteful, ineffective, or dehumanizing. Feminist subcultures have nurtured oppositional discourses and values, and we should work to assert and positively re-value them--despite the embedded prejudice against "maternal" behavior in male or female teachers. We can work to value the personal voice, contextual and subjective considerations, work that is in progress, unfinished, exploratory. We may choose to work with, not necessarily against, others' views and interpretations, to collaborate, to affirm non-hierarchical differences.

Nevertheless, we must test the accuracy of our assumptions and the efficacy of the methods we advocate. I am excited by the pedagogical possibilities now being endorsed by proponents of teaching through narrative, dialogue, and our subjective "locations" as students and teachers. Carol Witherell and Nel Noddings present a forceful case for "the power of narrative as an epistemological tool--as a way of knowing about ourselves and other knowers" (9) in *Stories Lives Tell: Narrative and Dialogue in Education*. Stories help us find our places in our interpretive, meaning-making communities and in our world, and "caring respectful dialogue"

among us is the "crucible for our coming to understand ourselves, others, and the possibilities life holds for us" (10). Work like Witherell and Noddings' will help legitimate powerful modes of self teaching and connected learning. Still we must not use such tools unthinkingly.

In her May 1991 article "Gender and the Autobiographical Essay," Linda Peterson raised for me some very provocative issues. Teachers need to contextualize their own subject positions in the classroom--that is, they need to acknowledge and examine carefully their gender-based assumptions about writing and their students. Peterson conducted a study of male and female Yale and Utah students' ability to write autobiographical essays. Her findings concluded that women writers do perform better than males on this type of writing, but not for the reasons we might assume.

The autobiographical essays in the study were scored holistically on three criteria:

1. "Significance: Does the writer understand the significance of the event?
2. "Clarity: Does the writer render the episode in a clear, coherent way?
3. "Richness of Detail: Does the writer use examples and details to depict the episode and make it interesting to the reader?" (172)

Conventional wisdom has it that women tend to "observe life more closely in all its complexity and fascinating detail," but "are not good at argument or abstracting principles from their experience" (172-173). Thus, in the areas of the first two criteria, women might be expected to have trouble, while in the third area they might be expected to excel. In actuality, male

writers performed better in category 3, richness of detail, while the female writers scored higher in categories 1 and 2, significance and clarity.

What immediately struck me about Peterson's findings is that the gender-based assumptions she exposes that are so strong in our current--especially feminist--thinking are not so very different from the flagrantly gender-biased literary criticism of the mid-Victorians that I have also been studying: women novelists were assumed in the nineteenth century, as apparently women writers still are today, to be good at observation of life and immersion in its emotions, yet deficient imaginatively and intellectually in not being able to abstract principles from the experience and emotions they can so powerfully evoke in their narratives.

Professor Peterson goes on to explain that the autobiographical essays judged less successful by writing teachers failed to meet not the three explicitly stated criteria, but other unstated ones. In particular, evaluators reacted negatively to those essays by young male and female writers who depicted gender-stereotyped views of their experiences, who represented them in predictable, formulaic patterns. Peterson speculates that perhaps some 18 and 19 year olds need to seek legitimacy in conformity, and submerge the personal voice, at least for the time being, in the common cultural language of gender stereotypes--a need which someone like me, a committed feminist, might well not recognize as legitimate. Indeed I might evaluate such essays harshly without recognizing what I was truly judging or why.

Real difficulties may be posed to our students by our writing assignments--and even autobiographical essays may not be an easy, innocent, accessible mode for our freshman college writers--female or

male. So we need to examine and acknowledge what we view as good writing--in our classrooms and in our own practice--for the unstated assumptions, for the ways embedded writing conventions and generic expectations empower or disable our students and ourselves. Feminist pedagogy and the primary research it stimulates are leading us into unexpected, uncharted ground. Yet it is this very ground we must commit ourselves to treat if we wish to move forward.

WORKS CITED

Belenky, Mary Field, Blythe McVicker Clinchy, Nancy Rule Goldberger, and Jill Mattuck Tucker. *Women's Ways of Knowing: The Development of Self, Voice, and Mind.* New York: Basic Books, 1986.

Bleich, David. "Genders of Writing." *Journal of Advanced Composition* 9 (1989): 10-25.

Bogdan, Deanne. "Canon, Curriculum, Censorship: A Case Study of the Poetics of Need." Session D18: "Current Issues in Feminist Pedagogy." Baltimore: 1989 NCTE Annual Convention, 18 Nov. 1989.

Caywood, Cynthia L, and Gillian R. Overing, ed. *Teaching Writing: Pedagogy, Gender, and Equity.* Albany: State U of New York P, 1987.

Clinchy, Blythe McVicker. "Issues of Gender in Teaching and Learning." *Journal of Excellence in College Teaching* 1 (1990): 52-67.

Elbow, Peter. *Writing Without Teachers.* London: Oxford UP, 1973.

Faery, Rebecca Blevins. "Women and Writing Across the Curriculum: Learning and Liberation." In Caywood and Overing, 201-212.

Frey, Olivia. "Beyond Literary Darwinism: Women's Voices and Critical Discourse." *College English* 52 (Sept. 1990): 507-526.

Gilligan, Carol. *In a Different Voice: Psychological Theory and Women's Development.* Cambridge: Harvard UP, 1982.

Lamb, Catherine E. "Beyond Argument in Feminist Composition." *College Composition and Communication* 42 (Feb. 1991): 11-24.

Lassner, Phyllis. "Feminist Responses to Rogerian Argument." *Rhetoric Review* 8 (Spring 1990): 220-232.

Lunsford, Andrea, and Lisa Ede. *Singular Texts/Plural Authors: Perspectives on Collaborative Writing.* Carbondale: Southern Illinois UP, 1990.

McCarthy, Lucille Parkinson. "A Stranger in Strange Lands: A College Student Writing Across the Curriculum." *Research in the Teaching*

of English 21 (Oct. 1987): 233-266.

Moi, Toril. *Sexual/Textual Politics: Feminist Literary Theory.* London: Methuen, 1985.

Peterson, Linda H. "Gender and the Autobiographical Essay: Research Perspectives, Pedagogical Perspectives." *College Composition and Communication* 42 (May 1991): 170-183.

Rich, Adrienne. *Blood, Bread, and Poetry: Selected Prose 1979-1985.* New York: Norton, 1986.

Steinitz, Victoria, and Sandra Kanter. "Becoming Outspoken: Beyond Connected Education." *Women's Studies Quarterly* 19 (Spring/ Summer 1991): 138-153.

Torgovnick, Mariana. "Experimental Critical Writing." *Profession 90.* New York: MLA, 1990. 25-27.

Witherell, Carol, and Nel Noddings, ed. *Stories Lives Tell: Narrative and Dialogue in Education.* New York: Teachers College P-Columbia U, 1991.